

Is Being Wild About Harry Enough? Encouraging Independent Reading at Home

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We began drafting this column in the midst of the latest Harry Potter craze. The television news was full of countdowns to the availability of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Rowling, 2007). Videos showed long lines of children, many in costume, eagerly awaiting the chance to find out what happens to Harry and his Hogwarts friends. Early sales reports were amazing: 1.8 million copies were sold in the first 48 hours after release (home.businesswire.com, retrieved July 25, 2007).

But in the midst of all this “Potter mania,” a few educators and reporters offered discouraging words. Although “many parents, teachers, librarians, and booksellers have credited [the Harry Potter series] with inspiring a generation of kids to read for pleasure” (Rich, 2007, para. 1), data about children’s recreational reading outside of school in the United States paint a different picture. National Assessment of Educational Progress results, for example, show that the percentage of children who say they read for fun almost every day dropped from 43% at grade 4 to 19% at grade 8 (Rich, 2007).

Apparently, being wild about Harry isn’t enough. Yet most educators agree that the goal of promoting children’s outside-of-school literacy experiences is important. In this department for *The Reading Teacher*, we will address issues related to family literacy, particularly ways to encourage parents and other family members to engage children in reading and related activities outside of school. In this first column, we address the “whys” and “hows” of encouraging independent reading at home.

Why Is Reading at Home Important?

Family literacy professionals often point out that parents are their children’s first and most important teachers. Indeed, research tells us that children whose families encourage at-home literacy activities have higher phonemic awareness and decoding skills (Burgess, 1999), higher reading achievement in the elementary grades (Cooter et al., 1999), and advanced oral language development (Sénéchal, LeFevre, & Thomas, 1998).

Two additional studies point to the “why” of reading at home. Durkin’s (1966) classic study examined the reading achievement of more than 75 children who read before first grade. Durkin found that these early readers maintained higher achievement over time than children who were not early readers. In her search for family influences on early readers, Durkin found commonalities. For example, parents reported that their children remained engaged in self-initiated writing projects for long periods of time and that they frequently requested that parents read to them. In highlighting what she considered to be the most significant findings of her research, Durkin (1966) noted

the presence of parents who spend time with their children; who read to them; who answer their questions and their requests for help; and who demonstrate in their own lives that reading is a rich source of relaxation, information, and contentment. (p. 136)

Hart and Risley (1995) studied the early language interactions in families of varying socioeconomic status (SES). Their multiyear study involved 42 families

who differed in socioeconomic status; gender composition and ethnic background (African American and Caucasian) were distributed among SES categories. For an hour each month (30 hours per family), Hart and Risley observed and tape-recorded family talk. They transcribed and analyzed the tapes to learn more about family conversations and children's opportunities to learn through language.

Hart and Risley (2003) found that "the 42 children [grew] more like their parents...in vocabulary resources, and in language and interaction styles... 86–98% of the words in each child's vocabulary consisted of words also recorded in their parents' vocabularies" (p. 7). They also found a stunning difference in children's access to language, perhaps the major finding of this important study. In brief, children from the wealthiest families heard over 1,500 more words each hour, on average, than children from the poorest families (616 vs. 2,153). Over four years, this amounts to a 32-million-word difference! Moreover, a follow-up study of 29 of the original children showed that children's rate of vocabulary growth and vocabulary use at age 3 was strongly associated with their grade 3 standardized test scores in receptive vocabulary, listening, speaking, semantics, syntax, and reading comprehension (Hart & Risley, 2003).

Together, these studies build a strong rationale for parents' involvement in their children's reading. From this body of research we see that what happens in the home makes a difference, for better or for worse. Moreover, the research results should be comforting to parents; encouraging at-home reading need not be time consuming or complex. Instead, parents can talk, encourage, answer child-initiated questions, and model their own literate behaviors.

How To Encourage Independent Reading at Home

As we have seen, home involvement can provide rich opportunities for children to develop as readers. Instructing parents to simply, "Read to your child" or "Encourage your child to read at home" may be a start, but it is not enough. Parents need specific suggestions and guidelines about what to do. We offer the following suggestions based on our own work with parents.

Keep It Simple. Many parents have limited time to devote to working with their children, so at-home ac-

tivities must be easy to implement. In addition, you should help parents see that the recommended activities have been proven to make a positive difference in children's reading achievement.

Help Parents See Their Options. They may want to read to their children. Many parents believe this "reading to" should cease when their children begin to read independently. Not so! Help parents of older children see the value of continuing to read aloud, perhaps chapters at bedtime or an interesting article from the newspaper. Parents can also read with their children, perhaps alternating pages or paragraphs. They may want to listen to their children read. They may want to sit side by side with their children, each reading what he or she desires. They may even want to encourage their child to read to a family pet or even a stuffed animal. All these activities are legitimate forms of independent reading at home that will lead to success in children's literacy development.

Provide Texts or Booklists. Some at-home reading programs fail because parents lack appropriate texts or the time or resources to acquire them. Ideally, children should take books home from school. Some families may have time for trips to the public library, but these trips shouldn't be required for participation in the at-home reading program.

Teach Parents the Five-Finger Rule of Book Selection. (The child opens to a page in the middle of a book and begins to read, raising a finger each time he or she encounters an unknown word. If five fingers are raised before the page is complete, the book is probably too challenging for the child to read independently.) It may also be necessary to talk with parents about such issues as whether it's OK for a child to reread a favorite book or to read books that are "too easy." (In both cases, it's OK!) You may also need to think about whether Internet reading will "count" for purposes of your program.

Help Parents See and Use Print Wherever It May Be Found. Newspapers, magazines, mail, notes, shopping lists, bumper stickers, street and store signs, religious texts and hymnals are just a few types of print in addition to books that parents can use to make literacy a part of daily life for their families. Captioned television is particularly noteworthy. We know many families who claim that their children learned to read by being exposed to print while watching favorite television programs—the children simultaneously heard

Great Websites for Learning About Children's Literature

www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/childrens/notable/notablecbooklist/currentnotable.htm

Notable children's books, shared by the American Library Association

www.monroe.lib.in.us/childrens/booklists.html

A list of web-based booklists for children

www.waterborolibrary.org/bklistjg.htm

Children's booklists by grade level

www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices_childrens.html

Lists of good books selected by children themselves

www.nea.org/readacross/resources/catalist.html

Teachers' top 100 books, compiled by the National Education Association

www.carolhurst.com/titles/allreviewed.html

Carol Hurst's children's literature site

www.hbook.com/booklists/default.asp

The Horn Book's list of recommended children's literature

www.cbcbooks.org/readinglists/childrenschoices/booklists.html

The Children's Book Council book lists

www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/awards.html

Calls itself "the most comprehensive guide to English-language children's book awards on the Internet"

www.bookspot.com/readinglists/childrens.htm

A site that lists dozens of other sites

and saw the words in print on the television screen.

Provide Special Support for Children Who Are Learning English and for Their Families.

Classroom volunteers can record texts in English for children to take home. Together, the parent and child can listen to the recording (several times, if necessary) and then read aloud along with the taped version.

Keep up With Children's Literature and Use Children's Interests to Make Book Recommendations.

Read the Children's Choices lists (published in *The Reading Teacher* each October) and recurring columns about children's books in *Reading Today*, *The Reading Teacher*, and *Language Arts*. Look for book information on the Internet. The sidebar features valuable children's literature websites. All were active in July 2007.

With these guidelines in mind, you are ready to plan the at-home reading program. The following are some things to think about.

- What time range do you want to encourage? How long should children read each day? For how many days each week? Be realistic here, and keep families' busy schedules in mind.
- How will you explain the program to children? How will you help them see the value in outside-of-school reading?
- How will you explain the program to parents? How will you help them see the value in outside-of-school reading?
- How will you "launch" the program? What mechanisms can you put in place to answer parents' questions while the program is in process?
- What can you do to encourage long-term participation? Some teachers use log sheets that record at-home activity. Children then return these to school periodically.

Not Even Harry Potter Can Do It Alone

We are convinced that at-home independent reading programs can benefit children (Padak & Rasinski, 2003). We need to find ways to develop authentic partnerships with parents and other adults with whom children interact outside of school hours. Not even Harry the Wizard can do it alone.

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